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Statement of NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

Submitted to the House Committee on Ways and Means to be included in the record of the
Subcommittee on Human Resources
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"Improving Work and Other Welfare Reform Goals"

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NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby has studied the impact of TANF since its inception in 1996. We concluded in 1997 that the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*, establishing Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) with its strict provisions to get people off welfare, does little to actually get people out of poverty. In 2001 and 2002 we conducted workshops in twenty-two areas of the country: “Making a Noise About the Need” to alert faith-based advocates to the needs of those living in poverty. Highlighted in the workshops is information on the inadequacies of TANF to help lift people above the poverty line.

The 1999 NETWORK study “Poverty amid Plenty: The Unfinished Business of Welfare Reform” found that those leaving Welfare rolls continued to struggle to meet basic needs, jobs they secured through TANF provided little economic security (22% were food insecure, compared to 25% of those not working), those with neither jobs nor TANF assistance rose from 52% in 1997 to 79% in 1998 – perhaps due to state success being measured by reduction of TANF recipients.

The 2001 NETWORK study “Welfare Reform: How Do We Define Success?” did find an increase in employment due to the “Work First” strategy. However, 47% of those in these work situations reported annual income of less than \$8,500. 34% lived above the poverty line and still needed services from emergency facilities.

In 2009 – 2010 we conducted a study of people (predominantly women) who were seeking assistance through agencies. This study: “TANF Tested: Lives of Families in Poverty during the Recession” was conducted through over 800 one-on-one interviews at 70 social service agencies including food pantries, family centers, homeless shelter and multi-service organizations in 20 states and Washington, DC. Dr. Douglas Porpora, a sociologist and professor at Drexel University in Pennsylvania assisted in design, instruments and analysis.

It has been adequately documented by others that TANF was very limited in its response to the Great Recession, by comparison with SNAP. Few states increased the numbers receiving TANF assistance, despite their high unemployment numbers and large increases in SNAP enrollment. Our study revealed many barriers keeping people from receiving assistance: language, complexity, need to travel to multiple sites to access services (without transportation or sufficient child care assistance) and the small amount of financial help available.

NETWORK would like to share the following key recommendations:

- **Measure of Success** The primary goal of TANF should not be to reduce caseloads, but to reduce poverty and improve child wellbeing. States should be given substantial incentives to lift more children and families out of poverty
- **Improved Coordination of Services and Interagency Collaboration** Agencies on federal, state and local levels must improve their collaboration so that individuals and families will be able to navigate more coordinated, less complex systems and receive the help they need.
- **Investment in TANF** The TANF block grant needs to be increased so that it is able to meet increased needs, especially during an economic downturn, and create effective pathways out of poverty.
- **Subsidized Jobs** States should be encouraged to participate in subsidized jobs programs and continue to build on successful programs that came from the TANF Emergency Fund.
- **Help for Non-custodial Parents** Non-custodial parents need better access to job training and education to help their families, and families need programs promoting responsible fatherhood.

- **More Help for People Facing Job Barriers** Additional funding is needed to help those facing multiple barriers (sick child, mental illness, emotional problems, physical disability, domestic abuse, etc.). Further, the disproportionately negative effects of welfare reform on Latinos should be addressed by giving increased access to education (including English training), job training and support services, and full access to TANF benefits should be restored to immigrants lawfully present.
- **Education:** The one-year time limit on education should be removed and the cap of 30% of a state's TANF rolls allowed to seek education should be expanded.
- **Five-year Time Limit:** The five-year limit should be eliminated or, at the very least, states should be allowed to exempt more than 20% of their current caseloads.

It is critical in this time of a "jobless recovery" that parents, in particular, are able to find employment which is adequate to the care required for their families. Improvements are needed to the TANF program in its reauthorization. Particularly due to the short supply of jobs, even for those who have been successful in education and in the workforce, we strongly recommend:

- eliminating the five year time limit, until the unemployment rate returns to under 7%
- expanding the education limits to previous levels. Completion of a four-year degree is far more likely to prepare someone for work which will truly allow them to move out of poverty, than will a 13 month training program.
- expand the subsidized work component of TANF.
- change the measure of success to the percentage of those enrolled in TANF moving out of poverty.

See CONNECTION (2010) **TANF Tested: Lives of Families in Poverty during the Recession**
http://www.networklobby.org/files/TANF_Report-Quarter3_3.pdf

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